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Song: The Emotional Storyteller in the Tales of Edgar Allan Poe

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Composed song and music are instinctive expressions of the human soul. Even when sound seems to burst out spontaneously from within, it is almost always motivated by a deeper urge — something that the characters in the works of Edgar Allan Poe know only all too well. Poe's works make frequent use of musical references and lyric art forms, elements which are often woven directly into the plot. His most striking musical interludes are poems that were added into stories to further enhance their meaning. Through poetic songs and instrumental music, characters such as Roderick Usher and Lady Ligeia express their unspoken feelings at critical moments in their stories. When these characters sing, play, or listen to music, what are they looking to assuage in their hearts? How does their song affect Poe's readers? To find the answers, it is necessary to examine song and music as expressions of human emotion, and to look at how song characterizes the different individuals who choose to sing. "The Haunted Palace" and "The Conqueror Worm," two poems which Poe interpolated the already-published short stories — "The Fall of the House of Usher" and "Ligeia" respectively — add deeper analytical and emotional levels to both the stories' plots and their respective speakers. These songs reveal the emotional state of the speakers, exposing inner workings that these characters would never reveal to others. The songs in these stories are valuable enhancements of the depth of the characters and the story itself.

Music has long been believed to be connected to the passions, whether in life or literature. To the ancient Greeks, music could affect the *ethos*, which governs the principles and therefore governs the right state of the world. Just as *ethos* was seen as a powerful influence on morality and behavior in human beings, so was music. Plato even argued that the "modes of music," scales and types of songs which correspond to different moods, "are never disturbed without unsettling the most fundamental political and social conventions" (Plato qtd. in Weiss and Taruskin 7). Music has always been connected to emotion in cultures around the world. Premodern Ireland, for example,

divided music into three groups, according to its visible effects on the listener: *goltraige* (weeping music), *geanntaige* (laughing music), and *andsuantraige* (sleeping music). (Henigan 142)

The different emotion associated with each type of music differentiates the style of the songs. Emotional style and intention greatly influence when and how the Irish songs are performed, as well as the effect achieved on the listener. The

same phenomenon is true of any song composed or performed with emotional intent. Song is a powerful rhetorical device precisely because of its connection to emotion. In *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*, Douglass remembers the slave songs of his childhood with tears in his eyes, because they were pure expressions of “the highest joy and the deepest sadness ... [of] souls boiling over in the bitterest anguish ... and a prayer to God for deliverance” (Douglass 20-21). The characters in Poe’s stories experience their own forms of joy and anguish, and they too turn to music to give life to their feelings.

In the short story “The Fall of the House of Usher,” Poe uses music to draw thematic parallels between the decay of the literal house of Usher, the Usher family, and Roderick Usher’s state of mind. When the narrator first reunites with Roderick, he describes him with musical terms, as when Roderick’s voice “varie[s] rapidly from a *tremulous* indecision ... to ... that leaden, self-balanced, and perfectly *modulated* guttural utterance” (Poe 92). A *tremolo* in music is literally a “trembling” of a note, an instance in which the same note or chord is repeated with great agility to create a quavering, suspenseful effect. A *modulation* uses the chords of one key to change to a different key, which may be starkly different from the first. If song and voice are the vehicles to express inner emotion, these two musical words alone hint that there is something unsteady about Roderick, something teetering on the edge which may change irreversibly if given just one push.

Throughout the story, Poe associates Roderick with the arts. Roderick conducts his own artistic activities, which seem to be his primary way of coping with his mysterious illness and his anxiety regarding his sister Madeline. He plays guitar and even composes, though he can abide only “peculiar sounds ... from stringed instruments” (Poe 92). Roderick’s forays into music, especially when the musical excerpts take on new meaning over the course of a performance, explore the story’s central theme of decay. The consistent trend of transformation makes it possible to track the multilayered decay in the story through the singular character of Roderick.

One of Roderick’s musical distractions is a version of “the last waltz of von Weber” (Poe 93-94) played on guitar. Stuart Levine and Susan F. Levine have clarified that the piece in question is actually the “Last Waltz” by German composer Carl Reissiger (1798-1859), though in Poe’s time it was believed to be the final composition of Carl Maria von Weber (1786-1826); Weber had transcribed a copy of the piece to use in performance, and suddenly died. The piece itself is a simple, bright waltz, featuring a steady bass line that provides the harmony for a lilting melody. It features a dance-like tempo and a jaunty major key and contains several slowly descending *sequences* (melodic fragments repeated again and again, each time at a lower interval). Roderick’s rendition of the song, however, is a “perversion and amplification of the wild air” (93). While of course we cannot hear the music, we can easily imagine the sound from the

written description. The melodic sequences might be inching eerily downward with chromatic pitches, spiraling slowly and painfully, just like Roderick's sanity after Madeline's "death." The steady, robust bass line could become a plodding death toll, as thick as the nearby tarn and as blunt as fists hammering on a heavy iron door. Indeed, the reader herself can perform an experiment to achieve a very similar effect in real life. Playing the arrangement of Reissiger's "Last Waltz" for classical guitar performed by Guillaume VDK, at half speed, reveals a sound that is warped and slowed. It creates for listeners a dissonant, perverse, uncanny song very similar to what Poe's narrator describes.

Another of Roderick's musical "*impromptu*" includes lyrics, which add yet another level to the song's thematic significance. The *impromptu* was a nineteenth century style of musical composition, designed to give the impression of being improvised, based on in-the-moment changes and discoveries of mood. As such, it is a fitting vehicle for both the transformations in the poem and the emotional changes that are eating away at Roderick's psyche. One piece Roderick performs for the narrator, "The Haunted Palace," tells the story of a radiant palace that thrives with beauty, light, and music, until "evil things" reduce it to a haunted ruin (Poe 95). Like the original "Last Waltz," the song begins beautifully, but devolves into an eerie, strange final picture. The verses read like an epic poem (a poetic form that was originally sung), and it follows a form that would suit a musical *impromptu*. In general, the lines follow an A-B-A-B-C-D-C-D rhyme scheme, but rhymes are occasionally switched, or replaced, leaving some words out of place. These hanging sounds emphasize the state of the palace, its development, or even its destiny. For example, when the palace is first mentioned in the third line of the first stanza, there is no rhyme for "palace," signifying that the palace's presence is not as stable as it may appear, making room for the first twinges of doubt and fear. In the sixth stanza, Poe uses four near-rhymes, one after the other ("valley"/ "see" / "fantastically"/ "melody"), creating a discordant, repetitive sound that reflects the endless movement of the ghosts through the palace (95), without hope for resolution or respite. In a similar way, Roderick falls into a starkly different emotional state after Madeline's entombment. Each passing moment and every little sound seem to him a new unwelcome discovery, which intensifies his paranoia and drives him further and further away from happiness or peace.

The poem "The Haunted Palace" also includes frequent musical allusions to characterize the palace at its two different states. Initially, the spirits in the windows are "moving musically/ to a lute's well-tuned law," rejoicing in their "sweet duty" to "sing / in voices of surpassing beauty" (Poe 95). The palace first evokes a realm of consonance and harmony and by extension peace and life as well. The spirits move together, perhaps dancing to a waltz similar to von Weber's. They are accompanied by the lute, an instrument frequently used in the Renaissance and Baroque eras for love songs and ballads, whether in public or for private aristocratic entertainment. The epigram of "The Fall of the House of

Usher” also likens a human heart to a lute (88). However, when the palace falls, the chaos of dissonance reigns instead: the spirits move to a “discordant melody,” and instead of a dance, the “hideous throng rush[es] out together” (96) without joy or pause. For the Haunted Palace, the difference between life and death is also the difference between consonant music and dissonant noise. The song illustrates decay through dissonance, just as Roderick’s treatment of the “Last Waltz” does.

This poem was the perfect addition for the story; the death of the palace is brought to life by the House of Usher, in every sense of the name. Not only does “The Haunted Palace” mirror Roderick’s mental decline from peace into anxiety, but it also foreshadows major events in the story. The fall and haunting of the sumptuous musical castle bears a strong resemblance to the literal fall of the House of Usher, including the deaths of its wealthy, artistic residents. Roderick fears this outcome, but he remains fixated on it, and cannot help but pour his obsession into his musical “phantasmagoric conceptions” (Poe 94). His musical compositions betray this obsession, though Roderick never explicitly tells the narrator anything about it.

Why might Roderick Usher have gravitated toward this particular kind of music, and why do his compositions take such a turn for the worse? Classical civilization, a consistent source of inspiration for literature and the arts in itself, considered music to be a fundamental tenet of a gentleman’s education. The Roman orator Quintilian even argued that if a man wanted to complete his education as an orator, he must “remove all doubts as to the value of music” (Weiss and Taruskin 11). Roderick apparently enjoyed such an education: he has descended from a family that was gifted “time out of mind ... in many works of exalted art ... as well as in a passionate devotion to the intricacies ... of musical science” (Poe 89). If one follows the classical philosophy regarding music, it makes sense that the modes and timbres of Roderick’s songs are significant, even intentional. So why do the “Last Waltz” and “The Haunted Palace,” which begin beautifully, become “dirges” that “ring forever” in the ears of his friend (93)?

Roderick’s songs are designed not only to give voice to his troubled emotions, but also to convey them to the narrator and Poe’s readers. By listening to his songs in their imagination, readers gain great insight into his state of mind: an ill, “highly distempered ideality” (Poe 93). Roderick’s mental state deteriorates into paranoia and terror. As he falters, his idealist inspiration becomes more like madness. In a similar way, his compositions begin beautifully, but there is something wrong, “distempered,” at the heart of his art. He perverts a lively waltz into something haunting and “wild,” and tells a story of an idyllic palace destroyed by “evil things” (94-95). In both musical interludes, something beautiful and whole is “assailed,” turned into a haunted “discordant melody” fit only for ghosts (96). Paranoid, isolated, and descending into madness, the frightened and controlling Roderick transfigures himself and Madeline into some sort of living ghosts long before they are both actually dead. His music and

poetry certainly reflect his “fall,” as announced in the story’s title and emphasized throughout its story and imagery.

In the short story “Ligeia,” Poe presents another character who uses poetry and music to express her deepest yearnings. Just like Roderick Usher, Lady Ligeia is highly educated. The narrator, her husband, remarks that “in the classical tongues she was deeply proficient,” as well as in modern languages, and “all the wide areas of moral, physical, and mathematical science” (Poe 59). With this education, Ligeia would not only be aware of the emotional impact of the arts as outlined by classical philosophy, but she is also clever and skillful enough to put them into practice. On another level, Ligeia herself is a kind of incarnation of music and inspiration. Poe’s poem “Al Araaf” includes odes to Ligeia as “the goddess of harmony” (Levine qtd. in preface to Poe 54). A later explanation of the story, editorially supervised by Poe, also describes Ligeia as the personification of music and intuitive creativity (Levine, Poe 54). Indeed, Poe’s story describes Ligeia’s appearance in musical terms. Her voice is “dear music . . . low [and] sweet,” and the “enthraling elegance of her low musical language” captivates the narrator (56-57). In the person of Ligeia, music is the beauty and mystery of creativity, drawn from the human spirit.

Armed with her intelligence and possessing a very strong will, Ligeia creates a song with a clear intent. Her fervor to express herself reveals her true motive and the challenge she sees: she wants to prevent her life and her inspired voice from being silenced by death. On the night of her passing, she begs the narrator to recite her work “The Conqueror Worm” to her. Ligeia’s main artistic achievement is not exactly a song, but a poem. However, the narrator considers it to be “verses composed by herself” (Poe 60), and there is certainly a music to the rhythm and rhyme of the verse. Furthermore, Poe believed that poetry had a musicality. In “Ligeia” and several other Poe stories, interpolated poems do seem to function as musical interludes or songs might do in a musical on stage. They are brief moments when the action stops in order to present a lyric expression that is more measured and more emotional, designed to comment on the inner state of things before the action resumes.

“The Conqueror Worm” (Poe 60-61) is a tale of the universal power of death, presented as an extended metaphor of a night at the theatre. The form of the poem is like an opera or play in itself. The first stanza acts as a musical overture, while the “angel throng” take their seats and the curtain rises. A bouncy, ever-shifting puppet performance in the second stanza, full of “mimes, in the form of God on high” brought “low” as “mere puppets,” can be likened to a comedic first act or to an opera’s pastoral ballet. The cries of “it shall not be forgot!” and the philosophical realization that the circle “ever returneth in” is the poem’s dramatic aria, cut short by a tragic shift into the fourth stanza, and the arrival of the Worm. The “pangs” of the perishing humans and the repetition of “it writhes!” create a frightening, thudding conclusion to the play. The final stanza corresponds to the end of the opera; the curtains fall as the angels leave

in silence, accompanied only by the soft funeral dirge of “out—out—out all” (60-61).

Musical wordplay is present throughout this heavenly theater, and it points to the true significance of the poem. As the angels take their seats, an orchestra “breathes fitfully / the music of the spheres” (Poe 60). *Musica mundana*, literally “music of the spheres,” was a concept recorded by the Roman musical theorist and statesman Boethius, describing the movement of the planets as the large-scale harmony of all life. In Ligeia’s poem, just like in Roderick Usher’s twisted compositions, life seems to be falling out of harmony: the orchestra is breathing “fitfully” (60), as though already on its deathbed. Throughout the second stanza, the play is described in quaint, nursery-rhyme phrases such as the onomatopoeic “mutter and mumble,” and the assonant “hither and thither” (60). The words emphasize the futility of man’s efforts in life in a very musical way.

Although the narrator is the performer of the verses, they certainly move Ligeia, who “half shriek[s]” as she ponders whether it has to be true. In her heightened emotional state, she imparts one more cryptic verse to the narrator: man need not yield to death entirely, “save only through the weakness of his feeble will” (Glanville qtd. in Poe 61). This refrain, the epigram of the story, is repeated four times throughout the tale, though notably only while Ligeia is alive. The emotional drama of “The Conqueror Worm” stirs the feelings of its composer, giving her strength “*but* for life” (Poe 60) when she is coming face-to-face with death. In fact, the song paves the way for the ideas that set Ligeia on the path toward defeating death itself.

There is one more significant aspect of Ligeia’s song. It would be difficult to learn any emotional truths about a character if the person in question was never able to make their voice known. Ligeia’s song characterizes her in her own words, and on her own terms. These verses are starkly different from the other paragraphs about Ligeia. Although the narrator is clearly infatuated with and awed by her, most of his descriptions are merely outside observations of her appearance or vague explanations of her scholarly interests. The narrator admits to being aware but uncomprehending when it comes to the depth of Ligeia’s emotion and will: “the outwardly calm, the ever-placid Ligeia, was the most violently a prey to the tumultuous vultures of stern passion. And of such passion [he] could form no estimate” (Poe 58). The story is named after Ligeia, but this song is the only time her creative “voice” is truly heard. Even though her verses are actually recited by someone else, the song nevertheless expresses Ligeia’s deepest convictions and struggles, something that would otherwise never be revealed in the narration. When she implores him to recite and reflect on the poem, Ligeia has a chance to hint to the narrator about the problem weighing down her heart — her own mortality — before she dies. Although she never admits her musings outright, these verses give her the drive she needs to fight for her life, even from the other side of death. Her song provides the only way for her to express her sentiments, which may not be spoken aloud, but are

powerful enough to help her thwart death itself. Without the song, this deeper level of her character would be entirely lost.

Song remains an incredibly important literary device because it allows access to a depth of character that would never be explicitly revealed. In the work of Poe, music and verse illuminate the complicated psyches of his most striking characters. To add deeper meaning to his previously published tales, Poe intentionally inserted these songs, and they work in tandem with each story's musical imagery. This technique does not end with Poe — the tradition of song as a vehicle for emotional expression is persistent throughout American literature. Why is this phenomenon so enduring? Perhaps song in literature is so effective because, to a certain extent, it is actually impossible to fully bring to life on the page. Words do not have sounds in the world—only in our minds and voices do they truly come alive. When music appears in literature, it requires the readers to fill in the blanks for the silent songs they read. We give the characters a voice with our own musical choices, which have been informed by our emotions, connotations, outside knowledge, and understanding of the characters' situation. Music and song in literature opens the door to greater emotional complexity within the story. It not only adds greater harmony to a work; it invites the reader to finish the song and bring its power into their world with “the voice of a thousand waters” (Poe 103).

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